

“WHEN THE WORD OF THE LORD IS RARE”

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

It's so quiet in the temple tonight you can hear the flame flickering on the oil lamp from across the room. One of Samuel's acolyte duties was making sure there would be enough olive oil to keep it going until dawn. Sometimes, depending on the quality of the oil, the length of the wick, or the draft in the room, the flame might go out. But several constellations have already passed by the stone frame window in his room, and the flame is still dancing around the lip.

Samuel is too young to know the middle of the night wasn't always so quiet. He's just a boy, and couldn't have imagined a time when the temple was commonly filled with God's voice and real presence. Here beside the Ark of the Covenant, the most sacred space in the world, God's own dwelling place, he might have hoped to hear God speak as God did to the priests of old—those who faithfully rendered service to God's people, who worked to preserve the faith for generations, who spoke face to face with God and lived to tell it. But, as it will be written in the Scriptures, the word of the Lord is rare these days. Visions are not widespread.

There might have been a word from the Lord to break the silence of so many nights before this one, but God withheld God's word. The temple has been corrupted by Eli's sons. They have shown contempt for the sacrifices brought to God. Not only would they desecrate people's offerings by selecting the choicest cuts of meat, and fattening themselves at the expense of the poor. But they were sleeping with women who served at the temple entrance. The text, in a rare expression itself, says of them, “Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels” (2:12)—a Hebrew term meaning “past praying' for.” They should have been dismissed from ministry long before. I wince to think what Samuel was exposed to as a child. If Samuel were living today, he might be one of those brave souls driven to tell their stories of abuse harassment at the hands of powerful men. I'm reminded of Jesus' words in Mark, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea” (Mk. 9:42). It would have been better for Eli's sons. This very day they will die by the sword.

Nevertheless, “the lamp of God had not yet gone out” (3:3). In spite of the culture of hedonism, of disregard for priestly practices, the narrator foreshadows hope. Knowing what we know, we might have expected darkness. But God still speaks. The flame darts here and then there, a wisp of smoke twists upward...

Samuel! Samuel! And Samuel responds, “Here I am!” But he runs to Eli. “Here I am, for you called me.” Eli says, “I didn't call you. Go back to bed.” So, Samuel shuffles back to his quarters.

Samuel! Again, he runs to Eli, “Here I am!” And again, Eli orders the child back to bed.

A third time, *Samuel!* And a third time Samuel barges into Eli's chambers. But it finally dawns on Eli that God is calling the child. He gives Samuel instructions.

Now, God comes to Samuel and stands there, calling like before, *Samuel!* *Samuel!* And finally, Samuel responds, "Speak, for your servant is listening." So, Samuel goes back to his cell. I imagine he falls asleep again. I don't know how he did, at this point, and then the Lord leans in to the microphone.

Samuel! Samuel

And, again, Samuel follows the Lord's instructions, responding to God by saying these words, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening"...

Is this merely a delightful fable, just a story "back there" in the Bible? Or, is it the case that God truly does speak, even when God's Word is rare? Can God still speak in the same fashion today? I believe the answer is, "Yes!" But, there are "conditions" that have to be met in order for us to hear God speak to us. I believe this story offers us several conditions, which, if we meet them, enable us to discern the Word of God. (Hear that acolytes, sitting close to the sacred things of God? You're right in the bullseye, you know!)

First condition: Even though the Church is a suspect institution, because of the scandals like Eli's sons were involved in, which go back for decades and are not limited to the Catholic Church. Even though church clergy are distrusted. (For example, I just read an article entitled, "The eight people more trusted than your pastor." I will say, however, that the clergy were above Congress, which was good – way above Congress! By the way, if you're a nurse, you were ranked 'most trusted.'") Even though the Church has gotten itself into this situation by making the story about God's salvation boring and unbelievable, if we step into and appreciate and steep ourselves in, we can still listen for God's Word. God speaks!

The first condition is *proximity to the Holy*. Recognize that Samuel was close to the sacred things, the holy things of God. Samuel was asleep. He ate, and breathed, and slept the sacred. He came, he showed up, he was there. And he began to develop instincts because he was close to the places where God often spoke. We might say to ourselves, "I never hear God speak to me." But we should ask, first, "Do I often go to the places God promised to be?" And, how often do we rest there? Do we stay long enough for our hearts to be at ease and receptive to God's Word?

The second condition is *apprenticeship*. Samuel was apprenticed to a Master, Eli. And, even though Eli might have been pretty boring, and not the most attentive father, he still knew how to recognize—though it took three times—that God might be speaking to this child.

Eli, the Master, helped Samuel, the apprentice, discern the Word of God. We must have our Elis around the congregation, ready to spot the Samuels among us, and to help them discern that yes, what you might be hearing is God's leading, God's speaking to you. We must also have our Samuels who treasure the wisdom of their teachers—Sunday School teachers, pastors, trusted friends, those who are beyond reproach, with solid character. An Eli is someone with integrity

that you know is steeped in the scriptures, whose wisdom you can depend on. You know that they have heard God's leading in their life over the span of decades. Eli is the one you can finally approach to say, "I believe God is sending some word my way—a dream keeps coming back to me. Can you help me discern this?" So, apprenticeship is the second condition.

The third condition is this – *you have to be naive.*

Samuel didn't know any better. He had not been corrupted by Eli's sons. He was eager. He believed in what might happen. And, when it did happen, he was ready to accept that it did. He had an innocence about him to run with reckless abandonment, with haste to receive the Word. He knew in his heart, his naiveté allowed him to ask, and to trust that it would be given, to seek and trust that he would find, to knock and to trust that the door would be opened.

How will you know when the Word of the Lord, in spite of being rare these days, in spite of visions not being widespread, how will you know that God has spoken to you or to us?

It helps to know that when the text says, "the Word of the Lord was rare in those days," the meaning of the word *rare* can also mean *weighty*. We are awash in words, are we not? Through empty conversation, through constant exposure to media. Words are everywhere, and they can have a way of becoming thin and porous to us—*lightweight*. But you know you are on to something about God's message when you hear words that weigh something. Such that you can put them on one side of the scale and know the gospel is on the other, and it evens out. The words weigh what the Gospel weighs.

The Word of the Lord comes to us like a meteor, and lands at our feet and shakes the ground around us. Or it lands in our hearts, and it shakes us to the core, and changes us. But something about the Word of the God will carry weight. That's a clue for us into how we may discern that this really is God speaking.

The Word of the Lord is rare these days. Visions are not widespread, which means our Church has an opportunity. It is a narrow opportunity—a narrow window of time—for our church and churches like ours to step into the chaos of Babel, and to offer these weighty words of the gospel to one another, to our city, and beyond...

To be a church, committed as we already are, to integrity, passion, truth, and beauty. To be a church which seizes the opportunity to demonstrate with confidence that though the Word of God is rare in these days, and though visions are not widespread, we may yet offer refuge to our city, our country, and to the world. We have the opportunity to be an alternative to the counterfeit gospels that have plagued us. We may offer our community a gospel that weighs something, that stands the test of time—the gospel of truth and beauty—instead of the counterfeit gospels that we have been fed for too long:

The counterfeit gospel of prosperity that says, "Jesus will make us happy, and give us all the things we ever dreamed."

The counterfeit gospel of individualistic faith that says, “This faith is just about me and Jesus. It’s just about me and my hiking trail and my Bible, and I don’t need help from anyone else.”

The counterfeit gospel of power, by which churches and clergy sidle up to the powers that be, in order to have their way done in the world, though their ministry and their message are compromised.

But, for us, we have an opportunity, a precious one, to offer the true gospel of suffering love that does not seek its own way, but waits in the silence, patiently with Samuel, until we begin to feel our ears tingle with God’s message.

...I want to tell you something that I heard in the future. I overheard a conversation – several years from now. I was walking downtown, and heard from a couple behind me, (and they didn’t know that I was eavesdropping, they didn’t know I was listening), but I was delighted by what they said. One said to the other, “You know, I’m not much for church. I’m not a big church person. I don’t really trust the church, and the other said, “I don’t either. But if you’ve lived here long enough, you know that there is one church you ought to know about. It’s that church at the intersection, you know the beautiful one with the dome. I went there once. I believe it was Christmas Eve, and it was beautiful. I was surrounded by candlelight. And you could tell that in that place, the flame of God had not gone out. And what I heard, and what I saw, made my ears tingle. You should go – don’t count them out, yet. I know they’re Baptists, but you should go. You’ll be surprised. You’ll be shocked. You might even be delighted.”

And I’ve held those words from the future in my heart, and have treasured them, since! So, I want you each to know, that even though the Word of the Lord is rare in these days, and visions are not widespread – God does speak, and God does give old men and old women dreams, and young men and young women visions, and sons and daughters ability to prophesy.

Are your ears tingling yet? The Word of the Lord is rare these days – *but not here.*

